

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Signing Labor Executive Orders and Memorandum Creating the Middle Class Working Families Task Force

January 30, 2009

Thank you for joining us today. It is a privilege to be among this diverse group representing labor unions and non-for-profit organizations and advocates for our business community. And I am pleased to be here with our outstanding Vice President, Joe Biden. I see some of my colleagues—got some Senators here; we got a Governor, at least one of them I see over here; Members of Congress; and a lot of good friends and Cabinet members. So this is an outstanding gathering.

Today we learned that our economy shrank in the last 3 months of 2008 by 3.8 percent. That's the worst contraction in close to three decades. This isn't just an economic concept, this is a continuing disaster for America's working families. As worrying as these numbers are, it's what they mean for the American people that really matters and that's so alarming: families making fewer purchases; businesses making fewer investments; employers sustaining fewer jobs.

The recession is deepening and the urgency of our economic crisis is growing. Yesterday, we reached a new threshold: the highest number of Americans receiving unemployment benefits on record. Every day it seems there's another round of layoffs, another round of jobs lost, and families' lives turned upside down. And we lost 2.6 million jobs last year, and another 2.8 million people who need and want full-time work had to settle for part-time employment. So this is a difficult moment.

But I believe if we act boldly and swiftly it can be an American moment, when we work through our differences together and overcome our divisions to face this crisis. While our GDP may have grown smaller, it's undiminished when it comes to our innovative spirit, our work ethic, our values, and our resolve and resilience as Americans.

For 2 years I traveled across this country. I met thousands of people, hard-working middle-class Americans who shared with me their hopes and their hardships. These are the men and the women who form the backbone of our economy, the most productive workers in the world. They do their jobs. They build the products and provide the services that drive America's prosperity.

And these are the folks who approached me on the campaign trail, in union halls, in church basements, and coffee shops and VFW halls and shop floors, and they told me about jobs lost and homes foreclosed, hours cut, and benefits slashed—the costs of life slowly slipping away and chipping away at the hopes of affording college or a new home or retirement. It's like the American Dream in reverse. These are the families who have, by no fault of their own, been hit hardest as the economy has worsened.

They need action now. They need us to pass the American recovery and reinvestment plan, a plan that will save or create more than 3 million jobs over the next few years and make investments that will serve our economy for years to come. We intend to double our capacity to generate renewable energy while redoubling our efforts to use energy more efficiently. We will rebuild crumbling roads and retrofit aging transit systems and renovate 10,000 schools for our children, and we'll bring health care into the 21st century by computerizing medical records, counting—saving countless lives and billions of dollars.

I'm pleased that the House has acted with the urgency necessary in passing this plan. I hope we can strengthen it further in the Senate. What we can't do is drag our feet or delay much

longer. The American people expect us to act, and that's exactly what I intend to do as President of the United States.

But passing my plan is not the end, it's just the beginning of what we have to do. We know we need to create jobs, but not just any jobs. We need to create jobs that sustain families and sustain dreams; jobs in new and growing industries; jobs that don't feel like a dead end, but a way forward and a way up; jobs that will foster a vibrant and growing middle class, because the strength of our economy can be measured directly by the strength of our middle class. And that's why I've created the Task Force on Middle Class Working Families, and why I've asked my Vice President, Joe Biden, to lead it.

There's no one who brings to bear the same combination of personal experience and substantive expertise. Joe has come a long way and has achieved a great deal, but he has never forgotten his roots as a working-class kid from Scranton, Pennsylvania. He has lived the American Dream, and lived and worked to make that dream a reality for others.

This task force will bring together my economic advisers and members of my Cabinet to focus on policies that will really benefit the middle class, policies to create jobs that pay well and provide a chance to save, to create jobs in growing fields and train workers to fill them, to ensure that workplaces are safe and fair as well as flexible for employees juggling the demands of work and family.

And I think I should note that when I talk about the middle class, I'm talking about folks who are currently on the middle class, but also people who aspire to be in the middle class. We're not forgetting the poor. They are going to be front and center, because they too share our American Dream. And we're going to make sure that they can get a piece of that American Dream if they're willing to work for it.

I also believe that we have to reverse many of the policies towards organized labor that we've seen these last 8 years, policies with which I've sharply disagreed. I do not view the labor movement as part of the problem, to me it's part of the solution. We need to level the playing field for workers and the unions that represent their interests, because we know that you cannot have a strong middle class without a strong labor movement. We know that strong, vibrant, growing unions can exist side by side with strong, vibrant, and growing businesses. This isn't a either/or proposition between the interests of workers and the interests of shareholders, that's the old argument. The new argument is that the American economy is not and has never been a zero-sum game. When workers are prospering, they buy products that make businesses prosper. We can be competitive and lean and mean and still create a situation where workers are thriving in this country.

So I'm going to be signing three Executive orders designed to ensure that Federal contracts serve taxpayers efficiently and effectively. One of these orders is going to prevent taxpayer dollars from going to reimburse Federal contractors who spend money trying to influence the formation of unions. We will also require that Federal contractors inform their employees of their rights under the National Labor Relations Act. Federal labor laws encourage collective bargaining, and employees should know their rights to avoid disruption of Federal contracts.

And I'm issuing an order so that qualified employees will be able to keep their jobs even when a contract changes hands. We shouldn't deprive the Government of these workers who have so much experience in making government work.

We need to keep our energy focused and our eyes fixed on the real measure of our prosperity, the success of folks that Joe and I have met across this country who are working hard each and every day. I'm eager to see this task force in action. I'm eager to discuss its findings with Joe Biden. And working with the people in this room, I intend to get this economy on track, to

create the jobs of the future, and to make sure that the American people can achieve their dreams, not just for themselves, but for their children.

So with that, let me introduce our Chair of our middle class task force, my Vice President and the pride of Delaware—[laughter]— Joe Biden.

[At this point, Vice President Joe Biden made brief remarks, and then the President signed the Executive orders and memorandum.]

I'm getting good at this. [Laughter]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:58 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Biden.

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